

Results from the Reader Challenge: Which MPA is the Oldest?

In the past quarter-century, MPAs have experienced a surge in popularity among resource managers looking for tools to help protect underwater habitats and other resources. Of the thousands of MPAs now in existence worldwide, the large majority of them have been designated since the mid-1970s.

But the modern history of marine protected areas began long before that. To get a sense of when, and where, the modern MPA movement began, one must pinpoint when the first MPA was designated. This is easier said than done. With the definition of "marine protected area" often differing from user to user, several MPAs around the world have been named, in print or on the web, as being "the first".

Wading into this issue, MPA News challenged readers in September to name the oldest existing marine protected area in the world, in hopes that we might help to settle this matter. Our guidelines were fairly simple: nominated MPAs must exist currently, and must fit the IUCN definition of marine protected area -- "an area of intertidal or subtidal terrain, together with its overlying water and associated flora, fauna, historical and cultural features, which has been reserved by law or other effective means to protect part or all of the enclosed environment." (IUCN 1992)

Evaluating the responses

In sorting through the nominations, the MPA News staff had to make some decisions on what to allow. The most critical decision was whether to consider coastal sites, including those without significant areas of open sea. In the end, we did allow these sites to be considered, so long as they had some intertidal or subtidal marine component. Restricting consideration to wholly underwater sites would have greatly limited the nominee pool.

We also had to decide what to do in cases where we knew of older MPAs than ones submitted by readers. Such was the case for South America and Europe. In the interest of providing readers with the most accurate information we had, we elected to publish the oldest MPAs of which we were aware, even if not nominated by a reader.

We received more than 30 nominations in all. The results appear below, with the oldest-known site featured first, followed in chronological order by the oldest MPA known from each continent, except Antarctica.

Some of the MPAs seem suspiciously recent to us. Was the oldest European MPA, for example, really designated just 25 years ago? We are printing this list with the condition that these are the oldest MPAs of which we currently know. If you are aware of older, existing MPAs, we would love to know of them -- e-mail us at mpanews@u.washington.edu.

Oldest MPA in the world: Royal National Park, New South Wales, Australia. Designated 1879.

Located on the southern outskirts of Sydney and managed by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Royal National Park consists of roughly 150 km² of bushland fronted to the east by the Pacific Ocean. It also includes intertidal terrain in Port Hacking, a large tidal inlet. The park is described in some detail on the NPWS website, at <http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/parks.nsf/parkContent/N0030?OpenDocument&ParkKey=N0030&Type=xo>.

Upon the park's designation in 1879, its regulations included bans on dredging and the removal of sand, rocks, and vegetation. Soon after, prohibitions on the use of explosives, net-fishing, and the commercial exploitation of oysters were added. Ian Brown, senior policy officer with the NPWS, notes that the park authority in 1893 reported that oysters "now cling to the rocks along the shore, as their threatened extinction some years ago was averted by the action of the [national park] Trust".

The whole of the Port Hacking estuary, including those parts in Royal National Park, is now closed to commercial fishing of all kinds. Recreational fishers are allowed to use only hand-held lines. There is also a prohibition on taking any mollusks in the intertidal zone adjoining part of the park.

Thanks for this nomination go to Ian Brown, NPWS. As nominator of the oldest MPA -- to our knowledge, at least -- Brown receives an MPA News tote bag.

Oldest MPA in North America: Breton National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana, USA. Designated 1904.

The Breton site consists primarily of mangrove and is managed by the US National Fish and Wildlife Service, whose jurisdiction extends 800 feet (244 meters) seaward from mean low tide.

Thanks for this nomination go to Mark Spalding, senior programme officer, Marine and Coastal Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme - World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), Cambridge, UK.

Oldest MPA in Asia: Matang Forest Reserve, State of Perak, Malaysia. Designated 1906.

The Matang Forest Reserve incorporates large mangrove areas. The reserve's purpose is to provide a sustainable supply of forest products for the local human population while also providing habitat for fish.

Thanks for this nomination, as well, go to Mark Spalding (UNEP-WCMC).

Oldest MPA in Africa: Tsitsikamma National Park, South Africa. Designated 1964.

Tsitsikamma National Park, on the south coast of South Africa, is a no-take MPA that includes extensive temperate reefs. At its present size, the park stretches 80 km along the coast and 3 nautical miles seaward.

Thanks for this nomination go to Colin Attwood, principal oceanographer, Marine and Coastal Management (an agency of the South African Ministry of Environmental Affairs and Tourism).

Oldest MPA in South America: Archipelago Los Roques National Park, Venezuela. Designated 1972.

Los Roques is an archipelago of 40 small offshore islands, including one rocky island and 39 coral cays in an atoll-like formation. The archipelago is one of the largest marine national parks in the Caribbean.

Source: Spalding, M.D., Ravilious C., and Green E.P. 2001. *World Atlas of Coral Reefs*. Prepared at the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre, University of California Press, Berkeley, USA.

Oldest MPA in Europe: Underwater Reserve of Monaco, Monaco. Designated 1976.

Prince Rainier III of Monaco designated this reserve to provide favorable spawning habitat for fish. The reserve includes bans on fishing, scuba diving, powered navigation, and anchoring.

Source: Monaco Government Tourist Office, New York City, USA.

Box: The original MPAs

Traditional fishing cultures around the world have engaged in closure-based practices that have functioned to protect marine resources. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the "tabu" or "kapu" concept established by Pacific island cultures centuries ago. Throughout Oceania, the right to fish in a particular area was controlled by a clan, chief, or family, and these controlling entities often established permanent or temporary tabu areas, in which fishing was off-limits. Depending on the culture, this prohibition was tied to a belief system, the death of a family member or chief, or sea burial sites.

With westernization of Pacific island cultures, these tabu areas disappeared. However, some cultures are reinstating the tabu concept in response to modern fishing pressure. In Fiji, for example, reef owners established four new tabu areas this past July. One of the areas marks the re-establishment of a traditional tabu site, around a sacred point on Yanuca Island where Fiji's first paramount chieftain is said to have descended.

For more information:

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